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BLACKFEET STUDENT COMES BEFORE THE BAR

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MISSOULA--

Joe McKay is unusual not because he's a Blackfeet Indian graduating in law. That's happened before, although only once at the University of Montana. It's not that his soft-spoken demeanor is set off by hair halfway down his back. That, too, has been done-- although on an Indian in the '80s it suggests something more than a penchant for sprouts.

What's special about McKay is his sense of a goal and single-minded pursuit of an education. Both are rare among students, but, traditionally, even more rare among Indian students. According to Indian educators, counselors and the students themselves, university education for them involves a certain amount of reconciliation between an Indian and non-Indian approach to things. Those who successfully bridge the gap are sometimes accused of buying into the white culture, selling themselves out in the process.

The theme keeps popping up. The Kyi-Yo Indian Youth Conference at the UM this year was billed "Walking in Sacred Balance Between Tradition and Progress." A videotape and booklet recently prepared by students and staff of the Native American Studies program is titled "May Our Education Not Betray Our Traditions."

And that's what's most unusual about Joe McKay. As he explains it, the primary impetus for his university education is being Indian. The two go hand in hand. There's no balancing act, he says.

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Blackfeet Student-- add one

What is "being Indian" in 1983? In talking to McKay it becomes clear that it's not just a matter of blood. It seems to more a sense of oneself-- a sense that is tied to a certain place and a group of people. Being in balance is respecting that sense, according to McKay.

"But we can't live as we are now, not as a group," he says.

"We can't survive without becoming part of the world."

This is not a recent realization for him. And if there's any resistance to the idea among Indians, that also is not new. When McKay was a senior in Browning in 1970 he helped organize the first Indian Club at the high school. At that time the American Indian Movement (AIM) was gaining speed. When some movement leaders came through town on their way to the Indian occupation of Fort Lawton in Washington State, they talked to the club. McKay disagreed then, as he does now, with their confrontational approach. He got up before the club after the leaders had spoken and advocated another avenue-- education. They called him an "apple Indian."

"Apple Indian" connotes one who is red on the outside and white on the inside; one who caters to the white culture. McKay's opening comments in a recent interview seemed inspired in the opposite direction.

"I grew up in Browning, except for three months in Billings in sixth grade. I remember going to school there the first day. My mom walked me to the school in the morning. There was a chain-link fence all around it. It was in the fall.

"I noticed all the other kids had their bikes, so at noon I went home and got mine. Back at the schoolyard some kids said 'you can't bring that in here.' I noticed all the bike racks outside and asked if you had to rent a space for

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your bike. We didn't have any racks like that in Browning. The kids said no, we just don't want you in here, 'cause you're a dirty Indian."

One of the main purposes of the Indian club, according to McKay, was to try to get high school-age Indians to feel good about who they were. The club's activities included learning about Blackfeet history, beadwork, dancing---along with current national issues.

"The message I always received from my father, from full bloods, from traditional leaders, was to learn what you need to know to get by."

McKay joined the military right out of high school so he could take advantage of the G.I. bill. His army stint was followed by three years of going to school "off and on" at Eastern Montana College between periods of living back at Browning.

"That was a time for socializing, more than anything else."

Eventually he buckled down and got a business degree from the University of Montana. His law school experience has been a matter of "getting to goals as soon as possible." Along the way he's achieved some things,however, including a place on one of UM's winning moot court teams.

Those are the credentials big name law firms look for. McKay's not interested. With his wife,Geraldine Weasel Fat, a Blood Indian, and their two boys, he's going back to Browning.

There the balancing act begins.

"I can't go out in Browning without someone laying a trip on me or thinking they have to measure up."

He's acutely aware, he says, of how he may seem to be setting himself apart. He's kept a self-imposed distance from most of his law school peers, for that reason.

"I don't go to the Barrister's Ball. I don't participate in Law Week. I don't even go out for a few beers after class." He relaxes by dancing at powwows.

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He doesn't hang around much with non-Indians, he says, because that's just what some Indians might expect him to do.

"At the same time, I don't sit around for five hours in the University Center and complain about how I'm not going to class because some teacher's discriminating against me."

While McKay has worked to keep contact with his tribe ("if you don't, you can't go home") he hasn't hesitated to voice his opinions as a tribal member. Recent oil and gas activity on the reservation has made tribal dialogue particularly volatile. A proponent of long-term development, with maximum monetary gains for the tribe over an extended period, McKay has already clashed with members of the tribal council.

He says he finds himself up against the counsel provided by outside, non-Indian attorneys employed by the tribe. He resents that situation, he says, not because those attorneys are white ("my great great-grandfather was Hugh Monroe, the first white to be adopted into the tribe") but because they don't represent tribal opinion.

"A sense of tribal involvement is essential to our existence as a people," he says.

Joe McKay is going to go it alone as a private, practicing lawyer in Browning, and some of the people he hopes to represent are those who will be least able to pay. He says he isn't worried about how he will live. And he plans to continue speaking out to the council.

"I'm going to be there and they know it."

Just before coming to law school, McKay was walking up a ridge on Chief Mountain with a friend. They spotted a bull trout in a stream and chased it up aways, but didn't have their poles. So they ended up just sitting there awhile, on the ridge. McKay says he began to hear something up there, in the

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middle of nowhere. He didn't say anything, but after awhile his friend heard it too. It was dance music.

Maybe that's what being Indian is. Learning business and law, being an attorney, if that's what you want-- but hearing the drum.

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NOTE TO EDITORS: "Blackfeet" rather than "Blackfoot" is used throughout this story since that is the common usage among Blackfeet. Elsewhere, including among Blood Indians, the term "Blackfoot" may be more common.